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Alicia Gutierrez

Dead Fish in the Desert: A Brief Photo-History of The Salton Sea

BY ALICIA GUTIERREZ

Located around 150 miles to the east and south of Los Angeles lies an unburied treasure and an ecological hotbed of debate. While you may not find the treasure in the archetypal sense, you'll find it in a still, stagnant, and salty body of water in the middle of the desert, the Salton Sea. Considered by many to be an ecological disaster, or a big puddle of sewage, few people take the time to see or smell past all these negative characteristics and find the history behind it. The Salton Sea was once a human-made desert Riviera, but now, it's come to be the abandoned, neglected brainchild of profit-seeking exploiters. Presently, government and environmental groups are trying to figure out how to deal with the Salton Sea. Understanding the quandary of the Salton Sea relies heavily on understanding its history. Human's adaptation to the environment can create a desert oasis-turned-wasteland, but ultimately, it's up to humanity to fix the mess that has been created and unearth the dissipating potential of the Salton Sea.

Driving along the 111 South from Palm Desert towards Niland, you don't really see a lot: date palms, the railroad, the occasional passing car; but one thing stands out as almost omnipresent. Perhaps it is the almost endless glittering, blinding shimmer of sunlight hitting the expanse of murky blue water, or the stench of rotting death. Either way, you can't escape it. Welcome to the Salton Sea.

Looking at it now, you would not guess this used to be a hot spot for the rich and famous in the 1950s and 1960s, but the Salton Sea's history is as rich as the sea is salty—from before the early natives who lived in the Salton Basin beginning around 700

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C.E. to the current increasing levels of salt responsible for algae blooms and wildlife mortality. Once a hub for the wealthy to dock their yachts, water ski and relax, all that remains of the Salton Sea's former glory are a few run-down, graffiti-covered yacht clubs, an eerie shoreline playground and a question about its rise and fall.



Though a beautiful shade of blue in this photo and from afar, up close the Salton Sea resembles more of a dark, amber beer with dead fish floating in it.

I vividly remember my first time really going to the Salton Sea. It was the middle of summer, I was on my way to my grandparent's house and I had a big crack in the windshield of my Jeep. I wanted to see the Salton Sea up close. I left both of my side windows open about an inch to minimize the expansion of the ever-spreading crack. I walked around and when I got back to my Jeep I wondered why there was a mysterious black foggy haze inside of it. When I opened the door, I realized those were flies. Determined to document my experience during a later visit, I armed myself with hand sanitizer and three of my cameras.

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Home to more dead fish than people, skeletons and remains of massive fish and bird die-offs can be found scattered along the shoreline of the Salton Sea. While approaching the sea, instead of sand, you can hear the crunch of bones and barnacles under your feet. Photo by: Alicia Gutierrez

Visible from space, the Salton Sea's surface area is approximately 380 square miles, roughly twice the surface area of Lake Tahoe. It measures 15.5 miles across its widest point and 36 miles in length. The Salton Sea we recognize now "is a body of water that currently occupies the Salton Basin."¹ However, it is not the first body of water to do so. The ancient coastline of the Gulf of California once extended as far north as Indio. As silt accumulated from the Colorado River, it enclosed and separated the newly formed Salton Sea from the Gulf. This basin, or sink, is approximately 280 feet below sea level, with the surface of the sea at around 220 feet below sea level. The original lake did eventually dry up completely, but several lakes have formed on and off within the basin, due to the unpredictable Colorado River which changed its course and directed water into the basin on several occasions.

During the summer a considerable amount of water evaporates from the Salton Sea when the neighboring desert can reach temperatures upwards of 115 degrees Fahrenheit. This continual process of flooding and evaporation is what also

¹ "Historical Chronology," (Salton Sea Authority), <http://www.saltonsea.ca.gov/about/history.htm> (accessed March 27, 2009).

contributes to its incredible level of salinity. While the desert receives only around two to three inches of annual rainfall, the Salton Sea is fed more water from

two main tributaries, the Alamo River and the New River. Both flow north from Mexico, receiving drainwater along the way. Considered the most polluted river in the United States, the New glugs through Mexicali, Mexico, a city... that dumps in raw sewage, inadequately treated sewage... as well as a visible assortment of trash...and phosphate detergents. [While] most of the bacteria from Mexico seem to die off before its waters reach the Salton Sea... the appalling condition of the New River serves to stigmatize the sea.²

Currently, the Salton Sea's salinity is calculated at 44 ppt (parts per thousand). This is 25% greater than the salinity of the Pacific Ocean whose current level is 35 ppt. When the water in the Salton Sea evaporates during the summer, the salt gets left behind. With less water present, and the same amount of salt remaining and accumulating, the concentration ratio of salt to water gets skewed and the water grows saltier and saltier. For example, in 1998, approximately 1.3 acre-feet of water with roughly 4 million tons of dissolved salt in it entered the Salton Sea through the main tributaries and other sources of water.³

In the early 1820s, trappers including Jedediah Smith, Kit Carson and Wm. Wolfskill visited the Salton Basin.⁴ During the California Gold Rush, miners who did not want to wait for the snow in the north to melt traversed Imperial Valley via Warner's Hot Springs and Carriso Creek.⁵ While the southern pass may have

² Robert H. Boyle, "Life—or Death—for the Salton Sea?" *Smithsonian* 27, no. 3: 86.

³ William de Buys, *Salt Dreams* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 221.

⁴ "Historical Chronology," Salton Sea Authority.

⁵ *Ibid.*

seemed an easier trek in terms of elevation, it was a desert nonetheless. Many miners who attempted the southern pass died along the way, especially those who attempted this feat during the summer.

Floods ravaged the Salton Sink from 1852 through 1867. Major development plans for irrigating the Salton Sea began in the 1890s. However, when funding was finally negotiated with the financiers, the blowing up of the American battleship Maine in the harbor of Havana on February 15, 1898, coupled with the war that followed it, put a stop to negotiations.⁶ In late 1899, irrigation mogul George Chaffey took interest in the California desert. He set up a reconnaissance of the area for that December and attempted to secure support from the California Development Company (CDC). Securing support from the CDC was no easy task, but Chaffey, “waged a board-room battle.”⁷ In 1901 when the CDC finally realized the capability that the Imperial Valley had for seemingly endless agricultural productivity, irrigation canals were dug from the Colorado River.⁸ Seven hundred miles of canal were developed, and from this, 77,000 acres of land could be cultivated and irrigated. George Chaffey had found a way to tame the desert. By 1904 the area began to develop, and more than 12,000 people moved to the neighboring desert, and towns of Brawley, Holtville, Heber, and Calexico. The railroad made transport easy and allowed for the growth of economic markets.⁹

⁶ Pat Laflin, “The Salton Sea: California's Overlooked Treasure,” *The Periscope*, Coachella Valley Historical Society, 1995, (reprinted 1999).

⁷ William de Buys, *Salt Dreams*, 79.

⁸ “Historical Chronology,” Salton Sea Authority.

⁹ Mildred de Stanley, *The Salton Sea: Yesterday and Today*. (Los Angeles: Triumph Press, 1966), 24.



Salton Sink, California. From: Salt Dreams, 156.

In 1906 and 1907 after another season of flooding, the biodiversity of the Salton Sea area, including large populations of waterfowl, like white pelicans, cormorants and brown pelicans, was finally recognized. Soon thereafter, sport fishing began to be promoted. From 1917-1918, during World War one, the catching of mullet became a lucrative business to the Salton Sea.¹⁰ After World War One ended, the Salton Sea became a tourist attraction for its mullets and Mullet Island on the south side of the Sea.

In 1924, the Salton Sea became a “permanent drainage reservoir”¹¹ after President Coolidge issued an executive order to set land aside. According to this executive order, the Salton Sea essentially became the place for Imperial Valley to allow its run-off to divert to. In 1928, construction for the Boulder Dam and All American Canal was authorized. This would put a stop to the flooding that devastated the Basin in the mid 1850s and early 1900s.

¹⁰ “Historical Chronology,” Salton Sea Authority.

¹¹ Ibid.

In 1929, the California Department of Fish and Game began an experiment. The Department of Fish and Game would go to the San Joaquin River, San Felipe, and San Francisco Bay, catch fish, and then transplant everything they caught, with the exception of sharks, into the Salton Sea. They introduced various species of fish to see which ones could survive. Even San Bernardino played a role in the creation (or attempted creation) of the Salton Sea's ecosystem. In 1934, 15,000 silver salmon fingerlings from the Department of Fish and Game hatchery in the San Bernardino Mountains were transplanted into the Salton Sea. Unfortunately, they were never seen again.¹²

During World War Two, ocean fishing was too dangerous with German submarines patrolling the waters. As a result, the Salton Sea became profitable for its mullet, again. Between 1944-1945, U.S. B-29s from the Army's Heavy Bombardment Squadron, commanded by Lt. Col. Paul Tibbets, made periodic yet highly secret practice flights to drop dummy bombs into the Salton Sea. It was Tibbets and his crew in the *Enola Gay* who dropped the first Atomic Bomb over Hiroshima.¹³ During World War Two, the Salton Sea also served as a Naval Base. There was some speculation because at the time it was never mentioned in newspapers, but the base was located just a few miles from the current Highway 86 on the southwestern part of the Salton Sea. According to local historians, "the base was headquarters for a torpedo and skip bombing range."¹⁴

In the 1950s, the Salton Sea became a tourist attraction again, but this time for speed boaters. Because of the high water density, boats were able to go faster on the Salton Sea than anywhere else. In October 1950, a Speedboat Regatta, sponsored by the American Power Boat Association was held. About 2,000 people attended and five world records were set.¹⁵ The Regatta was held in the Salton Sea in 1951, and even more speedboat records were set. With the increasing number of visitors, more kinds of saltwater fish were introduced to the Salton Sea, as a result the

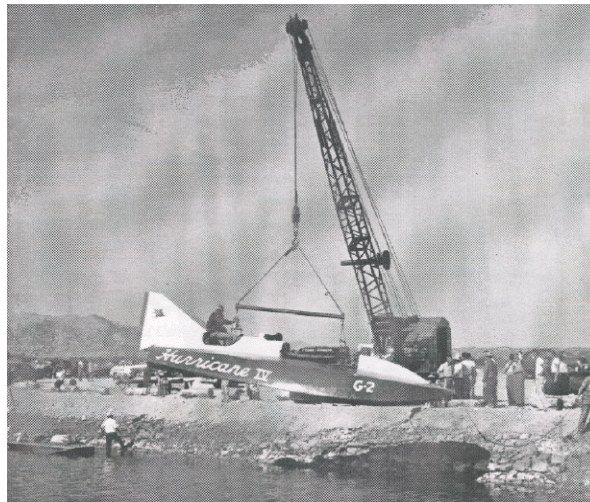
¹² Mildred de Stanley, *The Salton Sea: Yesterday and Today*, 52.

¹³ "Historical Chronology," Salton Sea Authority.

¹⁴ Pat Laflin, "The Salton Sea: California's Overlooked Treasure."

¹⁵ Ibid.

Salton Sea State Park was dedicated in 1955. In 1958, planning for the Salton City community began under M. Penn Phillips Co. Phillips and other developers bought nearly 20,000 acres that they subdivided on paper for schools, parks, churches, shops and houses. They also “spent \$1 million on a freshwater distribution system... and lavished \$350,000 on an 18-hole golf course.”¹⁶ The North Shore Beach and Yacht Club, a \$2 million resort, opened its doors in 1960, by this time, the Salton Sea had been, and now because of the North Shore Yacht Club, continued to be visited by the likes of Jerry Lewis, the Beach Boys, Frank Sinatra, Dwight Eisenhower and Desi Arnaz. The Salton Sea was gaining more and more attention. In fact, “by the early 1960s the Salton Sea State Recreation Area was attracting more visitors annually than Yosemite National Park.”¹⁷



"Hurricane IV" was always a popular entrant during the speedboat regattas. From: "The Salton Sea: California's Overlooked Treasure." As printed in the Coachella Valley Historical Society's Journal *The Periscope*.

¹⁶ Robert H. Boyle, "Life—or Death—for the Salton Sea?"

¹⁷ Steven Greenfield, "A Lake by Mistake." *American Heritage: Invention & Technology Magazine* 21, no. 3 (Winter 2006).
<http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/it/2006/3/2006.html>
(accessed April 2, 2009).

The Salton Sea's apex came right before its fall. In fact, for no apparent reason, M. Penn Phillips, the man who had been so consumed with the creation of the Salton Sea, sold all of his interests in the Salton Sea and the neighboring cities in November of 1960. In 1961, the California Department of Fish and Game began to worry about the increasing salinity of the Salton Sea. Further, they even predicted that the entire sea would die off by 1990. However, in the book *The Salton Sea: Yesterday and Today*, which was published in 1966, there were no such worries evident. In fact, this book markets the Salton Sea "as the ideal place to spend your weekends and vacations with marinas, yacht clubs, [and] air-conditioned luxury motels..."¹⁸ In 1968, Atlas Plastics Corporation, the only corporation that Salton City ever got, closed its doors, just 4 years after its inception in 1964. In 1974, plans to reduce salinity were discussed but never came to fruition because tropical storms Kathleen and Doreen did a considerable amount of damage and flooding to shore-side resorts.

Legislation over the Salton Sea had been going on since Theodore Roosevelt's presidency and role in the development of the Salton Sea, but it wasn't set into full motion until the Sonny Bono Memorial Salton Sea Restoration Act was introduced to the Senate in 1998. According to this bill, its passage calls for a further study of the Salton Sea, cost effective alternatives, and development plans to put these alternatives into action.

The current salinity levels of the Salton Sea are harmful to fish reproduction. Further, the excess run-off results in spiked increases in levels of nitrogen, phosphates, and fertilizers and cause the Salton Sea to enter a eutrophic state creating breeding grounds for botulism. However, the Imperial Valley, America's salad bowl, plays an important role in the agricultural industry and needs a place to dispose of its excess soil, salt and run-off water. The Imperial Valley is responsible for "somewhere between one-third and one-half of all winter vegetables consumed in the United States... and the value of the valley's annual production exceeds \$1 billion."¹⁹ If the Salton Sea grows any saltier, all the fish—and birds that feed off those fish— will die and the Salton Sea will

¹⁸ Mildred de Stanley, *The Salton Sea: Yesterday and Today*, volume 3.

¹⁹ William de Buys, *Salt Dreams*, 183.

resemble the Great Salt Lake in Utah. This is particularly bad as the Salton Sea is the last stop for birds on their migratory flight south. According to the Sonny Bono Memorial Salton Sea Restoration Act, the desired salinity for the sea is between 35 and 40 ppt, roughly that of ocean water. A plan was proposed to Congress to divide the Salton Sea into two parts. According to this proposal, the northern part of the Salton Sea, in Riverside County, would be maintained, and the salt would be pumped out or filtered into the southern part of the Salton Sea, in Imperial County. However, Imperial County resented this proposal because it appears to benefit Riverside County.

Presently, the Salton Sea still attracts visitors. There are no restrictions for fishing tilapia; it's a birdwatcher's paradise and a desert-junkie's campground. The weather allows for year-round recreation with hiking, camping, hunting, boating and off-roading allowed. I must admit, during my Memorial Day weekend photography expedition I saw more people at the Salton Sea than I had ever seen in every visit before, combined.

Perhaps it is an environmental ticking-time-bomb, but I will admit I have fallen in love with the Salton Sea. Its smell no longer bothers me and almost fades away. The hot desert air, mixed with the fresh winds and the saltiness of the sea, cunningly tempts you to take a deep breath. It has a character that is completely unique. Perhaps a local best described the Salton Sea's limbo when he said, "if the sea were clean, this place would be another Palm Springs, and goodbye to us all."²⁰ This is true. However, it seems almost antithetical to see the Salton Sea's former and potential glory as daunting. The Salton Sea is a place where the division between success and failure is beautifully and artistically blurred, thereby rendering the two indistinguishable from each other. If it were cleaned up, the Salton Sea would be just like any other lavish lakeside or seaside resort, but in reality, the Salton Sea's true beauty is found in its inconsistencies. Two hundred and twenty or so feet below sea level, this sea is a paradox. In the midst of a vast desert is the largest, and one of the

²⁰ Robert H. Boyle, "Life—or Death—For the Salton Sea?"

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few remaining wetlands in California.²¹ It is a place where rocks can float and wood can sink and a place to find dead fish in the desert.

²¹ Steven Greenfield, "A Lake by Mistake."

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